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Price for higher education in Alabama too high

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Last year, 9,000 Alabama youths going to college lost some or all of their state financial aid, and this year the toll could be higher. State funding for student financial aid fell more in Alabama last year than in any other Southern state. The bottom line means many students have had to find other sources of income and some likely have had to drop out of school. This is the future of our state. What can we do?

It's the same song, second verse. There is not enough money for education in Alabama. Lawmakers have returned to Montgomery to decide how the limited funds will be spent. This shortfall comes at a critical juncture for all levels of education and industry.

Alabama has made great strides in economic development in recent years. Higher education has expanded to meet the demands of a changing technological world. Research, robotics, welding, logistical command training, engineering, medical - these are all part of the various campuses throughout Alabama. They are making tremendous strides in providing industry with well-educated employees to fill 21st-century jobs.

Recently, Alabama ranked in the top tier of states in a national project on data collection. The state fulfilled the requirements of tracking 10 categories that included demographics, test scores and class performance. This has far-reaching effects from pre-K through college and into the business community. Why? In today's world, data are powerful. They show areas of strength and weakness. The data range from the fundamental, such as requiring every student to have a unique identifier number for tracking purposes, to the more complex, such as keeping track of every course a student has completed.

But, now the question is what do we do with the data? Do we use this knowledge to build on the strengths and eliminate the weak areas? Certainly, we do not want to expend energy and resources competing for limited funds with our education partners. A house divided is sure to fall, and our house has been inequitably divided for too long.

The lack of funding for all levels of education will have severe consequences, but spreading the pain throughout the system makes more sense than bleeding higher education dry.

It paints a dismal picture for our state's future when qualified students are forced to leave school, particularly when some type of post-high school training through a degree or certificate program is required for many employment fields. In a few years, many of today's jobs will be obsolete with new fields rapidly emerging. Opportunities need to be made available for students to obtain degrees in order to stay abreast of changing technology setting the pace for the future.

The reduction of resources at any level of education will pose a challenge, but for Alabama to remain economically competitive, it is imperative to stop draining funds from higher education and strike a balance with K-12. Thomas P. Davis is chairman of the Alabama Commission on Higher Education. E-mail: TPDavis42@aol.com.

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